

Senate approves bill to pay for charter schools with lottery money

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State senate vote on charter schools

Vote on [Senate Bill 6194](#)

Among Spokane area senators, Republicans Mike Baumgartner, Brian Dandel, Mike Padden and Mark Schoesler voted yes and Democrat Andy Billig voted no.

OLYMPIA – Charter schools would be able to operate with money from the state Lottery under a bill approved Wednesday by a divided Senate.

In an effort to satisfy the state Supreme Court, which last September ruled charter schools weren't "common schools" and thus ineligible for money from the general fund, the Senate voted to make them "uncommon schools," along with other alternative education institutions, and give them a separate source of money.

The bill may not be the final solution to charter schools, some supporters acknowledged. But it did show, in the words of Sen. Bruce Dammeier, R-Puyallup, lawmakers are "committed to solving this problem."

"The question is, do we send this bill over to the House, or do we not," he said.

Most Democrats opposed the bill and tried to change it. Sen. Andy Billig, D-Spokane, offered an amendment to put any new charter schools under the control of the local school board, making them like the two charter schools in Spokane. Currently all other charter schools are authorized by a separate state commission, which was a major stumbling block for the Supreme Court with the system set up by the 2012 initiative.

"We need a bill that moves to the middle ground," Billig said. "This amendment ensures we keep local control."

Sen. Mike Baumgartner, R-Spokane, who co-sponsored a separate bill similar to Billig's amendment, said that should be a "last best option" if the current bill fails.

"The era of one-size fits all education is over in this state," Baumgartner said. "We need as robust a solution as we can."

Sen. Steve Litzow, R-Mercer Island, praised the job the Spokane Public Schools has done with its two charter schools. "They understand how to make it work. No other school district has stepped forward."

The Billig amendment failed on a 21-27 vote.

After its first spirited debate of the 2016 session, the Senate voted 27-20 to send the bill to the House. But Democrats and Republicans continued to argue over the eventual fate of the bill.

Billig said he supports a fix for charter schools, but called the Senate bill a "false promise" to those schools' students and parents. He predicted it will not survive an almost certain Supreme Court challenge because the Lottery money will be back-filled from the general fund.

Litzow disagreed. It will clear the expected court challenge, he argued, because charter schools would no longer be receiving money directly from the general fund. "There is no commingling of funds," he said.

But both agreed whatever bill is signed into law will be back before the court.